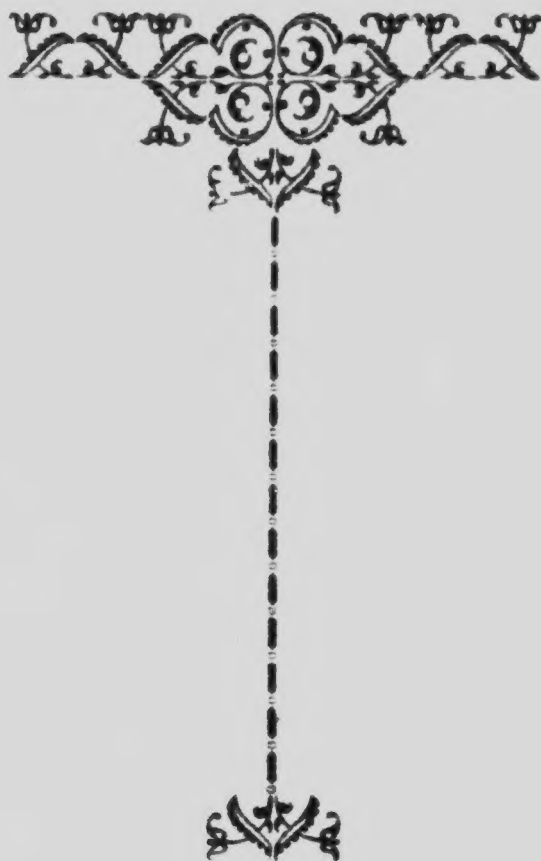


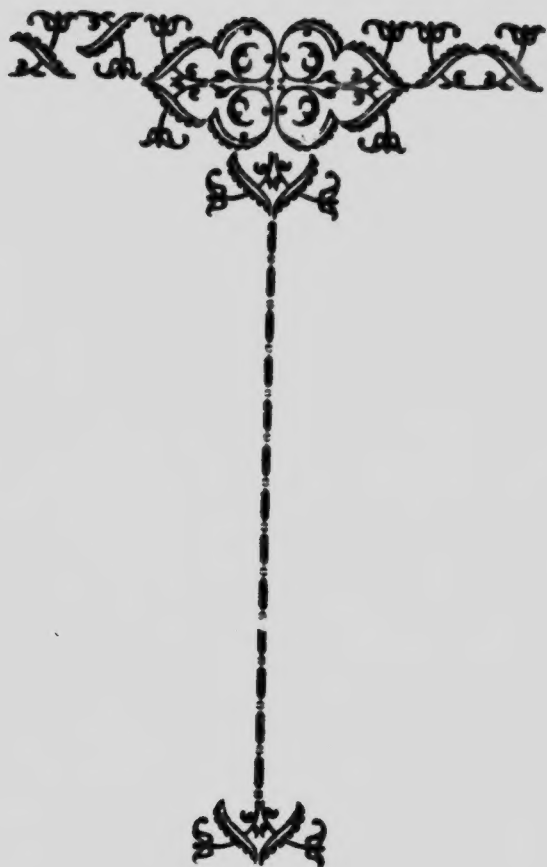
The Christmas Box



By

ALLAN PEARSON SHATFORD

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*"Lo, we heard of the same at Ephrata :
and found it in the wood."*

Psalm 132: 6



THE Choir Boys were having their final practise before Christmas. They had been thoroughly drilled for weeks and were letter perfect in their parts. Most of them could have repeated the entire service by heart. Canticles and psalms and anthems were as familiar to them as the carols. They were not able to see the necessity of running through them again, but the choir-master wanted to make assurance doubly sure, so he insisted that the whole programme should be once more rehearsed. The voices were getting a bit weary and the boys somewhat restless but he encouraged them by saying that they were in better form than he had ever heard them, and he looked forward to a perfect performance on Christmas Day.

Their treble notes were as clear as a flute, soaring high in the lofty chancel and dying gently among the carved cherubim of the arches. It needed little imagination to believe that the stone angels had broken into song! There was no accompaniment—the tones were too sweet and crystal-clear to need any support or enrichment. The heavier parts of the service were first sung.

that required the utmost of their skill and strength. As a final act they ran through the Proper Psalms. When they reached the one hundred and thirty second psalm they gathered up their remaining strength and sang it with all the volume and dignity belonging to a climax.

"Lord, remember David:
And all his troubles;
How he swore unto the Lord:
And vowed a vow unto the Almighty God
of Jacob;
'I will not come within the tabernacle of
mine house;
Nor climb up into my bed;
I will not suffer mine eyes to sleep,
Nor mine eyelids to slumber:
Neither the temples of my head to take any
rest;
Until I find out a place for the temple of the
Lord:
An habitation for the mighty God of Jacob.'
Lo, we heard of the same at Ephrata:
And found it in the wood."

The choir-master dropped his baton and the singing stopped.

"You must sing that verse with more joy! It is really the clause that links the psalm to Christmas. Sing it as if you had made a great discovery."

He lifted his baton, and they repeated the words with a burst of gladness. There was in it all the joy and happiness of the Christmas season. Then they proceeded with the rest of the psalm, chanting it in a reverential tone, making it a great act of worship.

"We will go into His tabernacle:

And fall low on our knees before His
footstool.

Arise, O Lord, into Thy resting-place:
Thou, and the ark of Thy strength.

Let Thy priests be clothed with righteousness:

And let Thy saints sing with joyfulness."

* * * *

"This shall be my rest forever:

Here will I dwell, for I have a delight
therein."

* * * *

The boys were dismissed, and were not long in shedding their cassocks. Hastily pulling on their coats and caps they rushed out into the wintry

afternoon to fill their exhausted lungs with the bracing air and to pelt each other with snowballs.

One boy, however, did not join in the shouting and fun. He was more leisurely in his preparations for home, and came out after the others had disappeared. Slowly he wended his way homewards, his head bent as if in thought, and a far-off look in his eyes. He belonged to the Rectory and was the apple of his grandfather's eye. The old man was a retired clergyman, living with his son, the Rector of the Church. Between him and the boy there was the closest kinship. Ronald carried all his difficulties and questions to his grandfather who explained things in such a beautiful way that the boy never forgot them. There was something so novel and attractive about the explanations that Ronald would listen to them with rapt attention. Many an evening they had spent together in a kind of catechism, the boy asking the questions and the happy old gentleman answering in a pictorial way.

As soon as Ronald entered the house he went straight to the little room reserved for his grandfather and voiced his perplexity.

"Granddad," he breathlessly cried, "in choir practise today we were told that one of the verses in the last Christmas psalm should be sung with

special joy because it has direct application to Christmas."

"Which one was it, my lad?" the old gentleman asked, though he knew perfectly well what the answer would be.

"Lo, we heard of the same at Ephrata: and found it in the wood," quoted Ronald. Before his grandfather could make any comment, the boy emptied out all his questions. "What did they hear at Ephrata, granddad? Where is such a place? And what did they find in the wood?" The benevolent old man smiled at the lad, and quietly replied:

"They made a great discovery, my son, one of the very greatest, greater even than they themselves knew."

"Yes," immediately interrupted Ronald, "that is what the choir-master told us. He said we were to sing it joyously as if we had discovered something important. What was it, granddad?" There was eagerness in his voice, as if he expected to learn something unusual.

"Well," drawled the old man, as if anxious to deepen the boy's interest, "It was really a Christmas Box they found—the first, original Christmas Box." He waited a second to see the effect of this

announcement. It was at once apparent. The boy's eyes lighted up, he drew closer to his grandfather, and with a teasing smile that never failed in its purpose, begged for the story. "Tell me about it, please, for I want to sing the psalm with an understanding heart."

That delighted the old man immensely and he gave immediate answer.

"It's a long story, Ronnie, and I think you had better have supper first. I will tell you this much by way of whetting your appetite. Ephrata is an old name for Bethlehem. It was at Bethlehem that they heard about the wonderful Box before they found it in the woods. That, you see, gives it at once a Christmas flavour, and tells you why we sing the psalm on Christmas Day. Run along now, my lad, and after supper you will come here, and together before the open fire we will hear the story of the First Christmas Box."

II

IT WAS just the right sort of evening for a Christmas story. The fire leaped high in the grate, offering an aid to the imagination. Outside, the wind moaned around the corners of the house and the snow beat softly against the windows. Grandfather settled himself in a capacious arm-chair, his feet resting upon a footstool, while Ronnie sat on a bear-skin, his knees drawn up and clasped by his arms, his face turned toward the blazing fire.

"I think I had better begin with a description of the Box," quietly said the aged preacher. "It is really a most unique Box, not at all like our modern Christmas boxes. It was a very large Box, being about five feet long, three feet wide and three feet high. It was made out of a peculiar kind of wood, called acacia, and considering the time in which it was made, must have been beautifully constructed, for it lasted a long time. When they found it, it was already hundreds of years old and it was in existence for hundreds of years after its discovery. It was covered all over with plates of beaten gold, both inside and outside. The most remarkable thing about it was the lid or cover. On the top of that

there rested a plate of thick gold of the same size as the lid. On each end of it there knelt an angel or cherub in gold, facing inward and with wings upstretched so as to meet and touch, forming a kind of canopy. On each of the four corners of the Box there was a golden ring, through which a pole, cased in gold, was run for the purpose of carrying the Box."

"Oh! I know now what it was," interrupted Ronnie, eager to show his knowledge. "It was the ark which the Israelites carried everywhere they went."

"You are right, my son," replied his grandfather, "and I am glad to find that you remember what your teacher taught you." He paused for a second to see if the lad was satisfied or if he wanted to learn more.

"Go on, granddad," he urged, "for I want to hear about the Christmas part of the Box."

"Before we come to that, Ronnie," he said, "it will be necessary to spend a little more time over the contents, history and meaning of that ancient symbol. For it was a most beautiful and suggestive symbol. It reminded the people of God. They believed that it represented the Almighty. He had His seat between the cherubim and you will

remember what a lovely name the throne had."

"Yes, granddad, it was called the Mercy-Seat," proudly answered Ronnie.

"Is not that a fine idea to have of God?" queried the old man, as his voice quivered with emotion, "a God of Mercy and Love, seated between angels, ready at all times with forgiveness and blessing! There were occasions when a light shone above the mercy-seat. At times it was so bright that the people could not look upon its glory. At other times it was dim and uncertain, according to the obedience of the people. Do you recall the name of that Shining Glory, my son?"

"I'm not sure that I have the word right, granddad," he timidly replied, "but I think it was Shekinah."

"Perfectly correct, laddie! And now we must take a look into the Box. Of course, that would not have been allowed in the olden days. Once a few curious people tried to do it but they were smitten with blindness. Now, however, the Box has become history so we can examine its contents."

"But why was it wrong for the people of long ago to look into it?" asked Ronnie.

"Because they knew perfectly well what was in it. They were prompted by idle curiosity. There

was no reverence in their act, and irreverence is always a blinding thing." Then the old gentleman resumed the thread of his story:

"You know well, Ronnie, what was in that Box, but you may not understand their full meaning. First, were the two slabs of stone on which the Law was engraved. I need not remind you, laddie, of the solemn occasion when that Law was given. It left an indelible impression on the people's minds. It taught them the necessity of obedience. Whenever they looked upon the Box they realized that their first and last duty was to obey God. The second thing in the ark was an almond rod with buds on it."

"That was Aaron's rod," interrupted the boy, "I remember teacher telling us about the testing of the rods. They were all laid up before the Lord and whosoever's budded, he was to be the Priest. In the morning they found Aaron's had buds on it"

"Right again," proudly responded his grandfather. "That rod was always kept in the Box to remind the people that God had his appointed channels of communion with the people. And lastly there was the pot of manna, as a continual reminder that God had fed them with bread in the wilderness. You see how beautiful these

three things were, Ronnie? God's care, God's communication, God's law, teaching the people the lessons of gratitude, prayer, obedience. These constitute at once man's greatest privilege and duty."

The flames had died down, so Ronald threw an extra stick upon the grate. There was a merry crackling and sparkling as the story-teller shifted to an easier position and went on with his tale.

"The idea of finding a tabernacle or home for God is as old as religion. Moses built the ark of which we have been thinking but it was not original with him. He got the idea from Egypt. You remember, Ronnie, that he was brought up in Pharoah's Court and must often have seen the pictures of Egyptian chests that held their deities. Man has always tried to enclose the God whom he worshipped, in order to bring Him close to life. A remote Deity was not at all satisfying. As time went on the Israelitish ark was invested with mysterious power. Whenever the people moved to another place, the Box accompanied them. It was carried on the shoulders of priests at the head of the mighty host. Silver trumpets blew the marching order. That symbol provided two things, safety and direction. The people knew they were safe when the ark led them and they followed loyally in the di-

rection it pointed. When it rested, they pitched their tents around it, making it central. It grew more and more sacred to the nation, and at last they shrouded it with curtains, so that it might not be exposed to vulgar scrutiny." Here the old man paused, as though entering upon a darker account of this strange, mysterious Box.

"Like all fine concepts, in the course of time the ark was used for purposes for which it was never intended. They carried it into war, and invoked its power to scatter their enemies. In one great fight against the Philistines it was captured by the enemy and for a long time it was held by them. But they had a superstitious dread of it and it was returned. Then it passed through many vicissitudes, being tossed irreverently from place to place. At one time it was left on a barn-floor! At another, it was kept in a private house. Finally it was completely lost! Israel was desolate! When David was king he worried greatly over the loss of the ark. He made a solemn vow that he would not sleep until he found it and had it placed in the Temple."

"That is where the Christmas psalm comes in," cried Ronald. He chanted the verses in a low, sweet voice:

"Lord, remember David, and all his trouble;
How he swore unto the Lord:
And vowed a mighty vow unto the Almighty
God of Jacob;
'I will not come within the tabernacle of
my house:
Nor climb up into my bed;
I will not suffer mine eyes to sleep,
Nor mine eye-lids to slumber:
Neither the temples of my head to take
any rest;
Until I find out a place for the temple of
the Lord:

An habitation for the mighty God of Jacob."

"Stop there, my lad," cried his grandfather.
"That was the earnest vow of David. He sought
for the ark, and heard a report of it in his own city
of Bethlehem, whose ancient name was Ephrata.
It had been in many places but was rumoured to
be at a woodland city called Kerjath-Jearim. So
he went there and discovered it in an obscure
corner among the trees. There was immediate
rejoicing. At once preparations were made for its
removal. It was borne in great honour to the
Temple on Zion's hill. 'Arise, O Lord, into Thy
resting place: Thou and the ark of Thy strength.'"

It remained there until Nebuchadnezzar swept down upon the city and sacked it, carrying the people into captivity. That was the end of the sacred Box but it was not the end of the eternal Truth of which it was the symbol. Long centuries afterwards there was a complete fulfillment of its message."

The old gentleman paused and looked into the upturned face of his grandson, hoping for a sign of understanding. It was given to him immediately.

"I am beginning to understand, granddad," eagerly cried the youth. "Jesus is the Ark of the New Covenant, the fulfilment of the type reposing in the ancient ark."

"Thank you, my bonnie boy! That makes it easier for me to tell you the story of the Real Christmas Box. We will have a moment's rest for replenishing the fire, because we need an extra light and warmth for the rehearsal of that glorious story." He patted the boy's head and settled himself for the serious explanation of the Christian Ark!

III

THE Christmas truth is an eternal truth," quietly began the boy's grandfather. "It has a double character. First, there is the desire of God to make Himself known to men. And as a counterpart there is the wish of man to know God. God seeking man, man seeking God—that is the twofold search that has gone on through all the ages of humanity. Man can only argue from the known to the unknown, and he has exhibited strange concepts of God. He has sought to embody Him in a thousand forms, some of them very crude. If the main desire be kept in mind it is easy to understand the clumsy efforts of man to body forth his thought of God. All the while God has been leading man into higher knowledge and more worthy ways of manifesting his desire. The profoundest way to approach God is through human personality. Through statutes and ceremonial, by way of types and figures, the mind of man can glimpse some understanding of the divine, but it is only in a human life and personality that God can be at all adequately appreciated. Hence, after all other methods had been tried God was pleased to reveal Himself in humanity. Form after

form had been used but the final form was the human! There was nothing greater that God could use to manifest Himself to men. That is why the Incarnation is the final revelation of God. The little girl expressed a great truth when she said to her mother who tried to comfort her in the darkness by the assurance of God's presence, 'Yes, mother, but I want a flesh God'."

Ronald chuckled at this pretty fancy in a way that told his grandfather that he understood what the little girl expressed.

"The ancient Box or ark was a foreshadowing of the Nativity," resumed the old gentleman. "Humanity was to be the enclosure of God—the divine dwelt within the human. As S. John so beautifully puts it: 'The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us'. Just as the old ark, the sanctuary of God, dwelt among the Israelites, so Jesus lived among men, the divine life embodied in the ark of the flesh. His humanity was the Box containing the divinity! That is why I have called it the real Christmas Box."

"Granddad, my mind is running ahead and following the parallel between the Israelitish and Christian Boxes, and it seems to me very beautiful,"

eagerly inserted Ronald. "But I know how much more lovely you can make it, so I am impatient to hear the rest."

This pleased the grandfather very much as he knew that his words would fall on receptive ground. "Let us, then, follow the analogy step by step, for there is much of beauty and inspiration in it." He warmed to his work and imagined himself again in the pulpit. "The Shekinah is easily explained. Jesus cried, 'I am the light of the world' And you remember, laddie, how the beloved disciple said, 'That was the true light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world' Or yet again: 'And we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.' The glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ far outshone the ancient glory above the Mercy-Seat."

"Yes," swiftly added Ronald, "and the cherubim are fulfilled in the angels who were present with Jesus on so many occasions of His life—at the Nativity, the Baptism, the Temptation and the Resurrection."

"Good for you, my boy," joyously replied the grandfather. "Now let us see how the contents of the old Box were fulfilled in Jesus. The tables

containing the law are beautifully exemplified in the life of the Master, 'I am come to do Thy will, O God', 'My meat and my drink is to do the will of Him that sent me.' He was the very incarnation of obedience. Aaron's budding rod is completed in Him who was and is our great High Priest, the mediator between God and man. As for the pot of manna did not Jesus say, 'I am the Bread of Life.' In every particular the New Ark was a replica of the old, though with a more heavenly and spiritual content. Jesus moved in and out among the people, reminding them of God, until at last they said, 'He is God'. He brought them safety and direction, just as the ancient Box did—He went before the disciples, leading them out into ever larger life. There was a mystery clinging about His person, like the cloud that hovered over the ark, or like the thick curtains that hid it from view. And the people made the same mistake about Jesus that was made about the old ark. They thought He would be a great warrior, triumphing over their enemies. They tried to make Him a King or to persuade Him to use His power for the destruction of their foes. And so they lost Him, or what was worse they rejected Him. The Christian Ark was captured by the enemy and lifted up upon

a tree, there to be the scorn and derision of the world."

"Perhaps that is what is meant by finding it in the wood," timidly suggested Ronald.

"I am glad you anticipated me there, dear lad" replied the grandfather, "for I seem to see a very touching fulfilment of the verse in the Christmas psalm. He was lost in the woods, and there He was found. On the night among the olives all seemed to be lost. The disciples forsook Him and fled. But it was on the wood of the Cross that humanity found Him, the Saviour of the world. I am going to quote a beautiful poem for you, my son, that bears directly on this part of our analogy.

'Into the woods my Master went,
Clean forspent, forspent,
Into the woods my Master came,
Forspent with love and shame.
But the olives they were not blind to Him,
The little grey leaves were kind to Him,
The thorn-tree had a mind to Him,
When into the woods He came.

Out of the woods my Master went,
And He was well content,

Out of the woods my Master came,
Content with death and shame.
When death and shame would woo Him
last,
From under the trees they drew Him last,
'Twas on a tree they slew Him—last
When out of the woods He came.'

"That is a very lovely poem, granddad," said Ronnie, and there was a slight quiver in his voice. "Won't you please let me copy it that I may memorize it and recite it to the choir boys? I am sure it will help them to understand better what they are singing when they come to the verse, 'Lo, we heard of the same at Ephrata; and found it in the wood'. It has all been very beautiful, Granddad, and will make my choir duties so much more interesting and happy. Thank you so much for explaining to me the Discovery of the Christmas Box."

"But I am not quite finished, dear lad," continued the grandfather. "There is always an application to every sermon. And you must now learn how all this applies to our own Christmas boxes."

IV

IN THE Rectory immediately before Christmas a room was set aside for the preparation of gifts and the other customs of the season. Here were deposited many parcels from members of the congregation who wished to assist in the provision for the hampers to be sent out to the poor. A little cupboard was allotted to the family where the personal remembrances were secreted. The Christmas Tree stood here, prior to being set up in the library on the eve of the Festival. The place was running over with articles of every sort, with holly and evergreen, with folds of tissue-paper and bolts of ribbons. There was an air of gladness in the room—it gave you a sense of joy to be there, a sort of tearful happiness swept over you as soon as you entered. A softness came into the heart and a lump rose in the throat. All the gentler emotions were set free, as the eyes looked upon and the mind contemplated the evidences of the sweet spirit of Christmas.

Grandfather suggested that they should move into this room while he made the practical application of his little homily. It would give point to his conclusions. Ronald joyously seconded the motion,

for what is more attractive to a boy than to have a peep into the preparations behind the scenes?

Hither they came, Grandfather standing beside the tree, surrounded by sacks and bags and mysterious parcels, and Ronald half-reclining upon an ancient divan where had been heaped bundles of clothing and the softer supplies for the needs of babes and little children.

"In a day or two, Ronnie," began the aged preacher, "we will be packing these articles in boxes and sending them out to gladden hearts and homes. The modern Christmas box is a strange evolution of very ancient practises. In some respects it is a contrast! In the early Christian times the box was a receptacle for charity. The poorer people carried boxes of clay from house to house soliciting alms. In England, Boxing Day fell upon the day after Christmas, the festival of S. Stephen. Only servants and the poorer people shared in the practise. This custom is older than Christianity and carries us back to the rural festivals of the Roman Paganalia. The Box was really the embodiment of love, of affectionate care and sympathy. It was directly in line with the original idea of the ark—the exhibition of the brooding, providential care of God. In every age and race there was the closest

connection between religion and provision. All the fruits of the earth were immediately linked with some god. In fact, the pagan religions identified their god with the fruit, so that in partaking the fruit they believed that they were actually feasting upon their god, that his life became their life. It has been crudely represented but the idea is good. 'The gift without the giver is bare.' They could not separate the provision from the provider. Thus, every box of fruit or provision became to them a tabernacle of the god. Something of the divine love and care was manifested in every act of charity. God is in the gift, or if He is not, then the gift loses its essential value."

"That is not hard to understand, granddad," replied the boy, "for I am sure that mother is in every gift she makes. I know that when I get my Christmas boxes they will bring me much of the love and character of the donors, otherwise they would be worth very little."

"Well then, that, my bonnie boy, is the real beauty and value of the Christmas box," said the grandfather. "When these hampers and boxes enter the homes to which they are sent, they will bring God to the people. It is the idea of the ark, and it is also the truth of the Incarnation. But this is

the thing that must never be forgotten—God must be in the giver before He can be in the gift. And this is really the full truth of Christmas. God was in Jesus but He is also in us. The Master insisted upon that cardinal doctrine. "Now are we the sons of God!" We represent the truth of the ark in our own persons. To put it quaintly and simply, each of us is a Christmas Box, set here in the midst of humanity for the purpose of manifesting the spirit of God to the world. There ought to be a light shining from our lives, lesser than, but not different from, the light that glowed above the Mercy-Seat or that shone in the life of Jesus. The light of a candle is the same in quality as that which blazes in the sun. 'Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in Heaven.' "

"The 'good works', granddad, being the presents and gifts we make at Christmas," commented Ronnie!

"Aye, my son, that is one of the ways in which we manifest the God within us," answered the grandfather. "It is quite true that there are many boxes and presents at Christmas, which can in no wise be regarded in this light. They are social amenities with very little meaning. A few of

them are pure hypocrisy but we are not now concerned with them. We are thinking of the true Christmas box, and there are many more of them than people think. I have faith enough in humanity to believe that the vast majority of folk at Christmas time are really moved by the Spirit of God, which is the spirit of love and good-will."

The old gentleman paused a moment before drawing a parallel between the contents of the modern Christmas Box and the original.

"It is not difficult, Ronnie," he said quietly, "to find the counterpart of the ancient Box's contents in every true Christmas gift. The Tables of the Law are here, for 'love is the fulfilling of the law.' Our gifts flow out of our love, a love inspired by that gracious life 'in which dwelt the fulness of the Godhead bodily,' and a love that seeks our neighbours' happiness. Here, too, is the budding rod of Aaron, for we are all priests, making sacrifices in order that the divine life of joy and peace may flow into the lives of our brethren. Buds will break into blossom on thousands of rods during this holy Christmas time because the mediating priests and priestesses of love stand before the altar of sacrifice. And the pot of manna is well represented, for is there not a beautiful care in all

the provision that is made at this time for the children of men ? With what care we select our presents, how painstaking we are in fitting the gift to the tastes and desires of the recipient! There is a divine solicitude in the arrangement of our Christmas presents, when they are genuine and the tokens of our love."

The old gentleman, with a sweep of his arm, included all the articles in the room, as he made his final comment: "These are all the symbols of love and may become the manifestations of God. When we pack them in the boxes we will be putting something of ourselves in with them, much of our love and sympathy. And all the thoughts and prayers of the donors will be included! Man is the child of God, and he is the truest child when he is loving and sympathetic and thoughtful of the needs and happiness of others. Like the ancient ark, these boxes and parcels will speak of God, reminding the recipients of His eternal love and providence. They will carry something of the Spirit of the Bethlehem-Child Who was the fulfilment of the ark of Israel, the supreme and final revelation of God. 'Lo, we heard of the same at Ephrata: and found it in the wood'."

As his grandfather's voice softly ended, Ronnie

slipped quietly to his side and lifted his face in a wordless thanks, his eyes shining with love and appreciation. The old man bent down and kissed his grandson. Just then the Church bells chimed their evening hymn.

"While shepherds watched their flocks by night,

All seated on the ground,
The Angel of the Lord came down
And glory shone around."

The notes floated out upon the frosty air, carrying their message far across the city streets.

"To you in David's town this day

Is born of David's line,
A Saviour who is Christ the Lord,
And this shall be the sign."

A solemn stillness held the room, where two generations stood, the old clergyman representing the wisdom of the years, and the boy incarnating the spirit of youth and hope and adventure. Again the bells chimed the abiding truth of the Christmas season:

"All glory be to God on high,
And to the earth be peace;
Good-will henceforth from heaven to men
Begin, and never cease."

Together they saluted the tree, symbol of the woodland where the ancient Box was found. Then they looked upon the scattered parcels, symbols of love and care and fellowship, the fulfilment of the original deposits of the ark. Together they chanted the verse of the psalm, "Lo, we heard of the same at Ephrata: and found it in the wood."



